United Nations S/PV.8260

Security Council

Seventy-third year

Provisional

8260th meeting
Wednesday, 16 May 2018, 10 a.m.
New York

President:	Ms. Wronecka	(Poland)
Members:	Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	Mr. Inchauste Jordán
	China	Mr. Ma Zhaoxu
	Côte d'Ivoire	Mr. Djédjé
	Equatorial Guinea	M. Ndong Mba
	Ethiopia	Mr. Alemu
	France	Mr. Delattre
	Kazakhstan	Mr. Umarov
	Kuwait	Mr. Alotaibi
	Netherlands	Mr. Van Oosterom
	Peru	Mr. Meza-Cuadra
	Russian Federation	Mr. Polyanskiy
	Sweden	Mr. Skoog
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Ms. Pierce
	United States of America	Ms. Eckels-Currie

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East

This record contains the text of speeches delivered in English and of the translation of speeches delivered in other languages. The final text will be printed in the *Official Records of the Security Council*. Corrections should be submitted to the original languages only. They should be incorporated in a copy of the record and sent under the signature of a member of the delegation concerned to the Chief of the Verbatim Reporting Service, room U-0506 (verbatimrecords@un.org). Corrected records will be reissued electronically on the Official Document System of the United Nations (http://documents.un.org).

18-14999 (E)

Accessible document Please recycle

The meeting was called to order at 10.15 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East

The President: In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite Mr. Staffan de Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, to participate in this meeting.

Mr. De Mistura is joining today's meeting via video-teleconference from Geneva.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I give the floor to Mr. De Mistura.

Mr. De Mistura: When I last briefed the Security Council on 9 April, it was at an emergency meeting (see S/PV.8225). On that occasion, I warned of the threats to regional and international peace and security arising from developments in or related to Syria. I know that today it is not an emergency meeting. However, the circumstances of an emergency very much remain. I do not need to remind members that tensions are high and regional and international confrontations have occurred several times. Allow me to highlight some recent events since 9 April.

On 13 April, the United States, France and the United Kingdom conducted missile strikes in response to the allegations of the use of chemical weapons in eastern Ghouta. Those countries say that the strikes targeted three research and production facilities near Damascus and Homs.

On 29 April, strikes were reported on Syrian Government military facilities in Hamah and Aleppo. Some media outlets attributed those strikes to Israel, alleging that those killed included Iranian personnel. Neither Israel nor Iran responded to those claims.

On 8 May, strikes were reported just south of Damascus. Syrian State media attributed those strikes to Israel. Israel did not confirm that claim. Israel then said that it had detected "irregular Iranian activity" in the occupied Golan, which it put on high alert.

Between 9 and 10 May, Israel carried out dozens of strikes against presumed Iranian and Syrian Government military targets across southern Syria. The Israeli authorities claim that they were responding to Iranian forces firing rockets from Syrian territory at Israeli military targets in the occupied Syrian Golan. Iran condemned the Israeli strikes and denied those claims.

We are not is a position to independently verify every aspect of those incidents. However, even an incomplete picture shows the troubling trajectory of the increasingly frequent and ever more intense international confrontations over Syria, unprecedented since 1973.

As the Security Council knows, the Secretary-General has followed those developments with great concern and called for restraint by all parties in order to avoid any acts that could escalate the situation and worsen the suffering of the Syrian people. The Secretary-General stressed that the United Nations has a

> "duty to remind Member States that there is an obligation, particularly when dealing with matters of peace and security, to act consistently with the Charter of the United Nations, and with international law in general." *(S/PV.8233, p. 2)*

On the issue of chemical weapons, let me again echo the Secretary-General's call for the Security Council to

> "agree on a dedicated mechanism for ensuring effective accountability for the use of chemical weapons in Syria" (*ibid.*).

As the Council well knows, as of now, we await the results of the ongoing investigation by the Fact-finding Mission of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons following its visit to Douma, with a report to be issued to States parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

However, we have also seen worrying developments elsewhere in Syria. Evacuations from eastern Ghouta were similarly repeated in the eastern Qalamoun area, southern Damascus and northern rural Homs.

First, on the military escalation, the pattern has been one of incoming air strikes and artillery and outgoing mortars and rockets towards Damascus. Then there was a negotiation, followed by an agreement for the evacuation of those civilians and fighters unwilling to remain under Syrian Government control or Russian Federation protection guarantees. We have also seen similar evacuation agreements

being discussed in Idlib province but in a completely different format — the reverse format. This time we are talking about civilians and fighters in Government-controlled areas, namely, Kafraya and Fo'ah, while considering evacuations — beginning with medical evacuations — following the three-year siege and intermittent attacks from armed groups surrounding that area.

Let me share with the Council a recurrent concern that I know that all members have. If civilians and fighters are simply funnelled into northern Syria — mostly into Idlib — then that might only postpone another conflict affecting many additional people, which I will discuss later. Therefore, it is important to keep close watch on future developments in Idlib province. Meanwhile, civilians continue to pay a terrible price. To be precise, 110,000 people have been evacuated to north-western Syria and Operation Euphrates Shield areas in the past two months. Many of them are reportedly traumatized and in urgent need of assistance and protection. Humanitarian partners are overwhelmed and stretched quite thin by the scale of those evacuations, but continue to do their utmost to respond to the growing needs, with the Council's assistance.

Returning to the topic of Idlib, if a Ghouta scenario were to play out there, the situation could be six times worse, affecting 2.3 million people, half of whom are already internally displaced and would have nowhere else to go. But that is not purely a question of the Syrians' suffering. We fear that any substantial escalation in Idlib, Dar'a or in the north-east might also result in risks not only to Syrian civilians, but also for international peace and security. As we know, many of those areas contain external and international forces. Conflict there might entail confrontations with those forces, thereby leading us down a slippery slope towards regional or potential international conflict. Therefore, discussions at the international level on how to prevent that and on de-escalation are needed, and, although they are taking place, they also need to be very intensive.

I was therefore very encouraged to see concrete discussions on de-escalation when I attended the ninth high-level Astana meeting yesterday, which covered the issue of Idlib in particular, as the three guarantors have a say and the means to avoid it. That round of discussions in Astana saw constructive discussions on how that might be achieved. While fully stressing the need to respect Syria's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, we saw at first-hand the parties engage actively on how to avoid a worst-case scenario in Idlib. Moreover, the working group, of which the United Nations is a member and a proactive supporter — as hundreds of thousands of people in Syria expect of us — held its second meeting on the release of detainees, abductees and bodies, and on the identification of missing persons. The members of the working group held constructive discussions on practical and concrete steps to address that key humanitarian issue. The guarantors informed us that they have secured the parties' support — which, if confirmed, is good news — for the activities taking place under the auspices of the working group, which is a positive development. As it is a matter of preliminary discussions, I hope that we will see progress with regard to that complex issue at the working group's next meeting, which we understand will be held in Ankara.

De-escalation is indispensable, as the Syrians themselves are telling us, but it is only one of the ingredients necessary to move forward the political process. We also need to overcome concrete challenges to meaningfully follow through with the Geneva process so as to implement resolution 2254 (2015). As instructed by the Secretary-General, I have consulted with a broad spectrum of relevant stakeholders and proactively identified options for a meaningful relaunch of the United Nations-facilitated Geneva process. Over a period of two weeks, I conducted an exhaustive tour of consultations with members of the League of Arab States; representatives of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq; the European Union (EU) High Representative; representatives of several key European countries, Turkey, the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran; and all members of the Council, during what I believe was a very productive and useful retreat in Sweden; United States authorities during my visit to meet with them in Washington, D.C., several days ago; and also the Syrian Government and the opposition, with whom I had constructive discussions on the sidelines of the Astana meeting over the past two days. My deputy, Mr. Ramzy, was also in the region this past weekend in continuous political contact with regional stakeholders, and my chief of political affairs, Mr. Robert Dann, is visting China as we speak to exchange views with officials of that important member of the Security Council.

What did I learn from that long tour? Not surprisingly, I returned to Geneva with a mixed picture.

Clearly, significant differences remain, but there is also much common ground and interest on the need, first, to de-escalate, secondly, to form a constitutional committee under the auspices of the United Nations, thirdly, to facilitate the establishment of a safe, calm and neutral environment — leading to our shared goals in the political process — and, fourthly, to respect Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence. However, those commonalities risk getting glossed over, especially in the absence of serious international dialogue. I will say more on that later. During my tour, my message to all was the need — now more than ever — for robust, strong, proactive and urgent dialogue and consensus at the international level to create the minimum conditions necessary for a realistic and credible political process. As we know, much water has flowed under the bridge and much has happened since resolution 2254 (2015) was adopted. We are therefore becoming increasingly realistic and know that we need a credible political process that takes into account the current situation and does not forget resolution 2254 (2015).

As the Secretariat, we are not sitting idle in that regard. We are assessing a number of creative options to update, revive and advance the Geneva-based political process. Let me state for the record that the United Nations remains ever-mobilized and -ready to work on the formation of a constitutional committee in accordance with the final statement of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi. I therefore welcome the intention of the Astana guarantors to actively and regularly engage with the United Nations in Geneva so as to see through a concrete follow-up to the statement since its adoption three and a half months ago.

I was also pleased to see a significant number of Member States reaffirm the primacy of the United Nations-led Geneva process, in general, and the need for a constitutional committee working under United Nations auspices, when I was at the EU-United Nations Brussels conference from 24 to 25 April. Those at the conference nearly unanimously reiterated the message that the only solution to the crisis will be political and that only such a political solution will pave the way for reconstruction efforts. Also in Brussels, we saw the entire United Nations system highlight the increasing needs of millions of Syrians, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and neighbouring countries hosting refugees.

Let me also note the important contribution of Syrian civil society in Brussels, in particular during a side event organized by the EU and my own Office. Those present did not shy away from debating with one another constructively and intensively on complex issues, such as transitional justice and sanctions. They all demanded the release of all detainees, abductees and missing persons. They all affirmed that any political solution must protect the right of refugees and IDPs. Despite their differences, Syrians — Syrian civil society — displayed a genuine commitment to dialogue and a spirit of negotiation that I hope can be replicated in the formal negotiations.

In Brussels I also met with a group of Syrian women activists who stressed that not enough has been done to secure the direct participation of Syrian women in the political process. I committed to translating our collective commitment to that inclusion into concrete measures, and I will count on the Council's support to keep that promise. For instance, in future intra-Syrian talks, I will insist that the relevant number of seats be reserved exclusively for Syrian women. When I am criticized, I hope that the Council will support me. I know it will not be popular, but it needs to be done.

Let me briefly touch on an issue that was raised by the civil society in Brussels and by many Syrians elsewhere who have been writing to us, that is, the possible implications of the newly adopted Law No. 10. We are quite aware of the concerns surrounding that law. We, as well as other United Nations partners, are seeking clarifications on the law's goals and repercussions, especially for refugees and IDPs who do not have access to legal documentation.

Let me conclude with two bottom lines.

First, de-escalation is critical between the Syrian and international stakeholders, both regional and global. We hope that the relevant players can re-establish some overarching rules of the road in that regard. We stand ready to facilitate such a discussion, with focused support from the Council and key countries for the good offices of the Secretary-General and myself.

Secondly, we must revive the political process in terms of the constitutional committee, as well as in terms of some initial steps towards the establishment of a safe, calm and neutral environment. We stand ready to facilitate discussions on both. Let me stress that a critical component of either aspect of the political process is active, continuous and positive United

Nations engagement with the Syrian parties. I repeat once again that we stand ready, today as always, to engage with the Syrian Government in Damascus. We will also continue our contacts with the opposition and Syrian civil society.

To unlock and lock those two aspects, careful diplomacy is required more than ever — careful, but proactive diplomacy, including at a high level. Hence, we look with interest to the forthcoming visits to Moscow and meetings of Chancellor Merkel and, later on, President Macron with President Putin, which undoubtedly will not avoid the issue of a political process in Syria. The United Nations believes that there is an urgent need for high-level diplomacy to support de-escalation, avoid any miscalculation and ensure a genuine communication system about a sustainable end to the conflict. With the support of the Secretary-General, we will increase our own efforts to contribute to that endeavour, including by offering further ideas and —if required, which we hope it will be — bridging proposals.

The President: I thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing.

I shall now give the floor to the members of the Security Council who wish to make statements.

Ms. Eckels-Currie (United States of America): Since this is my first opportunity to congratulate you upon assuming the presidency, Madam President, I would like to do so at this time. I also thank Staffan for his briefing.

Last week the world witnessed a new and extremely dangerous escalation in Syria. It should not surprise anyone on the Security Council that Iran was responsible. Iranian forces operating from Syrian territory launched a rocket attack against Israeli citizens — citizens of a sovereign State Member of the United Nations. The United States strongly supports Israel's right to act in self-defence. Iran's reckless and provocative acts last week prove what we have been saying: wherever Iran shows up in the Middle East, chaos follows. Last week's rocket attack against Israel is the latest in a pattern of destabilizing behaviour that is a dire threat to the region's stability.

Iran's rocket attack against Israel shows something else too. It puts to bed any myths about why Iran is present in Syria, or what its true objectives might be. The fact is that Iran has installed offensive rocket and missile systems in Syria aimed at Israel. Iran has introduced those threats that were not present in Syria before the conflict; they are now. Iran, together with Hizbullah and other militias, is taking advantage of Syrian territory to establish bases and training camps. They are moving ever closer to Israel. The United States calls on Iran, Hizbullah and their other proxies to take no further provocative steps. If they do, Iran will bear full responsibility for its actions.

It is also important to emphasize that Iran's actions do not serve the interests of the Iranian or the Syrian people. The Syrian people get no say in whether Iran threatens war against Syria's neighbours, but it is they who have to live with the consequences.

All of us on the Security Council have an important choice to make: we can stay quiet and watch as Iran builds up the infrastructure to create another Hizbullah in Syria, or we can speak up and take steps to put real pressure on Iran to stop. For our part, the United States refuses to stay quiet. Russia in particular has a special responsibility here. Its troops are on the ground, sometimes alongside Iran's. Russia must know that Iran's provocative actions do nothing to help resolve the war in Syria. Russia must know that Iran's actions do just the opposite. They only inflame, prolong and widen the conflict.

We heard once again from Staffan today that there has been very little progress on the political track. There has been no progress at all in Geneva, or following Russia's own conferences in Astana and Sochi. Since January, the United Nations was supposed assemble a new constitution drafting committee that would help kick off a new round of talks. The United Nations was supposed to have the ability to choose which people would serve on the committee, and the United Nations was supposed to be empowered to facilitate those talks. Instead, the Al-Assad regime has backtracked, stalled and then refused to cooperate.

At the same time, the Syrian regime escalated its brutal military campaign. It seized eastern Ghouta, at the cost of thousands of lives and tens of thousands displaced. It used chemical weapons in Douma. Just yesterday, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Fact-finding Mission released a report determining that chlorine was used during attacks on 4 February in Saraqib.

As reported by the Fact-finding Mission, the facts of that chemical-weapons attack bear the hallmarks

of similar attacks conducted by the Al-Assad regime. As we have said before, the United States assesses that the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons well over 50 times since the start of the civil war. The Al-Assad regime, with Iran's and Russia's full support, is choosing to pursue a military solution instead of a political solution, and that goes against everything we should stand for as the Security Council.

In the aftermath of eastern Ghouta, the need for a real ceasefire could not be more obvious. Already, we see the Al-Assad regime launching new attacks in Idlib and the south-west. As Staffan noted, a Ghouta scenario in Idlib would be six times worse than the horror we saw in recent months in Ghouta. Air strikes in the south-west have tripled in the last month, even though that area is part of a de-escalation zone. Russia is supposed to be a sponsor of that zone. It must urgently meet its commitments to prevent the regime from carrying out attacks and stop Iranian militias from expanding their foothold in the south.

Members of the Security Council — all of us — must push the political process forward. There is Council unity behind that goal. There is a clear blueprint for a political solution in resolution 2254 (2015), which we adopted unanimously. We have to send a clear message to the Al-Assad regime and its backers: the end of the conflict can be reached only via the United Nations-led political process. There must be constitutional reform and free and fair elections under United Nations supervision. If the Al-Assad regime does not comply, we need to be prepared to impose real costs on it for its years of defiance and the devastation it has wrought in Syria. If we take those steps, we can start to change the calculus of the Al-Assad regime and its allies in Syria. We can show them that further conflict is not in their interests and that it is time for them to genuinely commit to a political solution. But as we saw last week, the longer we wait, the greater the risk of confrontation. Now is the time to act to reduce tensions and address Iran's designs in Syria. That is how we can prevent further escalation and even worse suffering. There is no time to waste.

Mr. Polyanskiy (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Mr. De Mistura for his briefing. We can see that his personal participation in the meeting on Syria in Astana enabled him to make it a substantive one. We appreciated his call for active diplomacy, which Russia has advocated for from the very beginning. We continue to make significant efforts to facilitate a political settlement in Syria despite the undermining effects of the aggressive action by the United States, the United Kingdom and France in April against a number of civilian structures in Syria. I discerned no sympathy about what happened there in the statement by my United States colleague, despite the fact that it was a blatant breach of international law and did absolutely nothing to advance any kind of a settlement. Furthermore, her statement had an odd, confrontational tone that I felt certainly did not correspond to the message that Mr. De Mistura wanted to convey to all of us today, which is that it will be important for diplomacy to function if the peace that the Syrians have awaited for so long is to finally be established on the ground.

Unlike some Security Council member States, which prefer taking unilateral measures to finding ways to solve problems, Russia is focusing on steps to genuinely improve the situation on the ground and advance the prospects for a political settlement. As Mr. De Mistura already noted, the ninth meeting of the participants in the Astana process concluded yesterday in the capital of Kazakhstan, and the guarantors adopted a joint statement. We are grateful to the leadership of Kazakhstan for its steadfast support. The meeting in Astana considered concrete measures for resolving a number of political and humanitarian issues and analysed the situation in the de-escalation zones, which play a key role in maintaining the ceasefire regime, reducing the level of violence and generally stabilizing the situation in Syria. The importance was noted of increasing efforts to help all Syrians and restore normal civilian life and, to that end, of providing fast, safe and unhindered humanitarian access and essential humanitarian and medical assistance, and creating the conditions needed to enable the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes, as well as people's freedom of movement.

A second meeting was held of the working group on the liberation of detainees and hostages to discuss the handover of the bodies of the dead and the search for missing persons, with the participation of experts from the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross The importance of continuing joint efforts with the aim of building trust among the conflicting parties in Syria was emphasized. The Syrian Government declared its willingness to engage with the working group and decided to appoint a special representative on issues related to its work.

In line with the provisions of resolution 2254 (2015), the meeting affirmed its determination to continuing to promote a political settlement by helping to implement the recommendations of the Syrian National Dialogue Congress held in Sochi. The consultations with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the Syrian parties will continue, with a view to establishing the conditions conducive to starting the work of a constitutional committee in Geneva as soon as possible, whose parameters will have to be agreed on by the Syrians themselves. We will get nowhere without their consensus, so there is no point in proposing artificial frameworks for the process, especially if they are based on provisional plans of some kind. Thanks to the Astana process, we have succeeded in generating momentum for a political process based on intra-Syrian talks under the auspices of the United Nations, although, as we have noted, the triple alliance's aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic has significantly limited the room for manoeuvre in that regard.

Concerted efforts by the guarantor countries are bringing us steadily closer to eliminating the presence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Jabhat Al-Nusra and other terrorist groups altogether. The recent situation in Syria has continued to be difficult. The guarantor countries' efforts are certainly not being helped by provocative initiatives from external actors, which merely strengthen radical sentiments among groups opposing the legitimate Government and fuel their reluctance to work for negotiated solutions.

In Damascus, the operation to liberate the southern regions and suburbs of the capital from ISIL-affiliated groups continues, but Yalda, Babila and Bayt Saham are now fully under the Syrian authorities' control and civilian life there is returning. Russian specialists are helping the Syrian authorities to restore civilian infrastructure. Mines are being cleared, socially significant facilities are being rebuilt and electricity and water services are being restored. In eastern Ghouta, some 65,000 residents previously evacuated from the area have returned to their homes. However, in some other regions where the Syrian Government lacks access, the situation has continued to deteriorate. That is especially true of the Rukban and Al-Tuwaihina refugee camps, as well as the former ISIL capital, Raqqa, where the humanitarian situation is disastrous. Measures must be taken to rectify it without delay. The solution is simple — restore Damascus's sovereignty over those territories as soon as possible.

Government forces and Palestinian volunteers, with aerial and artillery support, have continued to combat fierce resistance from terrorist detachments in the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk. The militias wounded several dozen civilians in mortar strikes on residential areas in the north-east area of the camp. In the past week, the territory held by the illegal armed groups in Yarmouk has been significantly reduced.

The Syrian army's assault on ISIL positions in Deir ez-Zor province has also been ramped up. ISIL's adherents have incurred considerable losses in manpower and equipment and have been driven out of an area of about 1,500 square kilometres. A large-scale operation to eliminate ISIL is being conducted in the eastern part of Syria with the aim of completely defeating the terrorists based in hard-to-reach desert areas, who have been increasing their attacks on Government forces in the Euphrates region and Homs province.

We will continue the difficult work of restoring peace in Syria. Frankly, we are disturbed by some international and regional actors' disrespectful attitude to the issue of Syrian sovereignty, of which we have recently seen alarming manifestations. It is important to understand that this will not help to normalize the situation in Syria or the region as a whole. It fuels the conflict and reduces the prospects for a political settlement. For example, how can we be sure that reckless and illegal actions similar to those that occurred a month ago will not be repeated on some other trumped-up pretext? The reckless conduct of a number of international and regional players who claim to have common sense has considerably slowed progress regarding a settlement of the situation in Syria. If they cannot or will not help us with that, they should at least not interfere.

In conclusion, I would like to touch briefly on the remarks by my American colleague. Basically, more than half of her statement was about Iran, not Syria, and Syria is the item on our agenda today, after all. I would also like to ask the Americans some questions we have about that. Before they blame Russia or Iran, I would like to ask what the reason is for the presence of United States forces in Syria and what their real objective is. The territories under their control have become grey areas where extremists of various stripes and real terrorists roam freely. In particular, what is going on with the several hundred ISIL followers who are being held by forces loyal to the United States under United States oversight in the region beyond the

Euphrates? They are not being investigated, and nor are they being returned to their countries of origin. We are worried that ISIL will re-emerge in those areas when the United States withdraws from them, which it must do sooner or later.

In conclusion, I would like to once again assure the Council of Russia's willingness to support any diplomatic efforts that can bring an end to the miseries of the Syrian people and peace to that long-suffering land.

Mr. Ma Zhaoxu (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I would like to begin by thanking Mr. De Mistura, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, for his briefing. I appreciate his tireless efforts to find a political solution to the conflict.

In recent weeks various members of the international community have made tremendous efforts to restore momentum in the political process. China welcomes the latest round of Astana talks and its joint communiqué, and salutes Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Iran for their efforts. We hope that this dialogue will continue to play a positive role in helping to maintain a ceasefire in Syria and advance the Geneva negotiations.

China has always maintained that a political solution is the only possible option where the issue of Syria is concerned, and that achieving that goal will require efforts on the international, regional and national fronts. First, the international community should continue to give its support to the United Nations, as the main channel for mediation, and to Mr. De Mistura's efforts to relaunch the Geneva negotiations as soon as possible, on a basis of full respect for Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and with a view to helping the conflicting parties to engage in negotiations on political governance, the Constitution, elections and counter-terrorism. The Council should remain united in moving the Syrian political process forward.

Secondly, the countries involved in the region should take the country's long-term interests and stability into consideration and play a constructive role in helping to find a political solution. China notes that there have been attacks on targets inside Syria. We hope that the parties concerned will remain calm, show restraint and work together to maintain regional peace and stability.

Thirdly, both the Syrian Government and the opposition, based on concern for the future of their country and the fundamental interests of their people, should proceed to participate in the Geneva negotiations without preconditions, in accordance with the principle of a dialogue that is Syrian-owned and -led, and on the basis of resolution 2254 (2015), with a view to actively engaging in gradual efforts to reach a settlement that is acceptable to all the parties.

For its part, China has been working relentlessly to find a solution. On 13 and 14 May, in the first instance of such an event being held on Syria in China, we hosted an international symposium in Shanghai on the prospects for a political settlement to the Syrian issue. It was attended by Xie Xiaoyan, China's Special Envoy for Syria, a representative of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General, and the Special Envoys of the United Kingdom and France for Syria, as well as experts and scholars from many countries. Participants held in-depth discussions on the prospects for a solution, the factors bearing on a political settlement and the role of the international community. Our Special Envoy remains in close contact with the parties concerned in his continuing efforts to help reach a solution. Together with the rest of the international community, China stands ready to continue to play a positive and constructive role in finding a political solution to the issue.

Mr. Umarov (Kazakhstan): We thank the Special Envoy for Syria, Mr. De Mistura, for his update, and we were glad to hear some encouraging notes of optimism in his briefing.

Despite the numerous problems on the humanitarian and political fronts in Syria, Kazakhstan believes that it is imperative to continue to promote a settlement of the crisis while implementing resolution 2254 (2015). We are glad that at their meetings held on 14 and 15 May in Astana, the representatives of Syria's Government and opposition, along with those of the guarantor States, unanimously confirmed the importance of continuing the process. Among other issues, they addressed the importance of increasing efforts to ensure compliance with the various agreements reached during the previous eight rounds of the Astana talks. On the other hand, they also agreed that Geneva should remain the main international platform from which to seek and implement a political settlement of the Syrian crisis. It will also be important to continue to support the aims of the Astana talks and further Geneva negotiations, while ultimately merging those important platforms with the aim of achieving positive results.

We thank the Special Envoy for his consultations with various Foreign Ministers at the recent summit of the League of Arab States, as well as with Ms. Federica Mogherini, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. His high-level meetings in Moscow, Tehran, Riyadh and Ankara, as well as his consultations with several European ministers and senior representatives of the United States, are also commendable. We are encouraged by his summary today of his meetings and the outcomes of the Astana process, and we note his hopes for progress and his readiness to increase his own efforts and those of several of the principal stakeholders to revive the political process.

We can all see that de-confliction and the precautionary measures to safeguard protected sites under humanitarian law are working. So far this year, 500 additional sites have been de-conflicted, as the process is known. Their coordinates have been voluntarily submitted through the United Nations, and today the total number of sites stands at 661.

We are hearing a number of continuing questions and concerns about the outlook for Idlib, which should certainly be our top priority, simply because it has such a large population of vulnerable ordinary citizens. We agree with Mr. De Mistura that since Idlib is six times larger than eastern Ghouta, and therefore has six times more civilian residents, it is in an extremely vulnerable position. We cannot afford a war in Idlib and we therefore call on the main stakeholders with an influence on the conflicting parties to hold negotiations at the national and local levels and in the wider region in order to mitigate the potential tensions.

We are impressed by the courageous stance of and the sacrifices made by the United Nations, the Red Crescent, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Norwegian Refugee Council, which are serving under the most challenging circumstances.

To conclude, we also hope that the Brussels Conference, held on 24 and 25 April, will help to generate conditions conducive to the peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis.

Finally, we emphasize once again that the most important condition for the settlement of the Syrian crisis is a political process, through direct dialogue and the use of confidence-building measures among the parties, without which there can be no lasting results. We should not forget that it is the Syrians themselves who should begin to shape the future political system of the Syrian State, with the necessary legislative reforms, its territorial and administrative structure, and presidential and parliamentary elections, in accordance with resolution 2254 (2015).

Mr. Inchauste Jordán (Plurinational State of Bolivia) (*spoke in Spanish*): We express our gratitude for the briefing that we heard from Mr. Staffan de Mistura, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria, to whom we reiterate our support in the discharge of his duties.

Once again we cannot but express our sorrow at the fact that this conflict has gone on for six years now and we are still witnessing the ongoing siege and violence suffered by the Syrian people, mainly children, who, in addition to living with the psychological aftermath of the situation, are also in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. We deplore any act of violence that puts human lives at risk and therefore call for an end to the violence and urge the parties to refrain from any hostile, provocative or unilateral actions, in order to prevent any further suffering of the Syrian people and any further destabilization of the region.

We welcome the holding of the summit of the three ceasefire guarantors in Ankara, Turkey, in March. We will be focusing closely on the next summit, which will be sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Likewise, we welcome the recent Astana meeting. We deem its outcome positive, as were the agreements reached one year ago exactly, when the important de-escalation zones were established. We believe that that international initiative has served to reduce the level of violence and has facilitated, and will continue to facilitate, the path to peace and stability in Syria.

We therefore call for greater coordination among the local authorities within the de-escalation zones, humanitarian agencies and the Syrian Government, which will make it possible to improve the living conditions of the local population, with a view to contributing to international efforts to end the conflict in Syria.

We call once again for efforts to continue with respect to the full implementation of resolution 2401 (2018), so as to ensure safe, sustained and unhindered humanitarian access to all those who require it. The protection of the civilian population and civilian infrastructure must also be a priority within the

framework of respect for international law and international humanitarian law.

We deem imperative the voluntary return of internally displaced persons in a safe and dignified manner, as soon as the situation permits. For that to happen, demining will be vital in those areas where it is necessary. We would urge that the political dialogue agenda continue to focus on the release of detainees and abductees, as well as on the identification of missing or deceased persons.

We stress the efforts made towards the voluntary return of thousands of people to eastern Ghouta and other cities north and south of Damascus and their subsequent full return. My delegation would draw the attention of the Security Council to the need to protect thousands of innocent civilians, including children and the elderly, and move them to Idlib. It is urgent and pressing that peace be maintained and any escalation of violence avoided in that area, as the aftermath could be tragic.

We believe that measures must continue to be taken to reduce the level of violence on the ground, promote confidence among the parties involved, alleviate the humanitarian situation and promote ongoing initiatives aimed at finding a peaceful political solution. The process must take place on the basis of the various initiatives taken and meetings held at different levels. We therefore underscore once again the commitments made at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, held in Sochi on 30 January, with a focus on strengthening the United Nations-led political process in the framework of the road map set out in resolution 2254 (2015), in particular through the drafting of a new constitution and the establishment of a constitutional committee, which we believe must be representative and impartial. We hope that the work of that committee, in Geneva, should start as soon as possible and should be active and dynamic and include the participation of all parties to the conflict.

We welcome the good offices and mediation of the Secretary-General and his close collaboration with the members of the Security Council in the quest for a peaceful solution to the crisis in Syria.

To conclude, we reject any attempt to divide or fragment Syria along ethnic lines or to foster sectarianism there. It is the Syrian people themselves who must freely decide their future and their political leadership, in the framework of their sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, without any external pressure or interference.

We reiterate that the only way to resolve the conflict in Syria is through a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political process that is inclusive and based on consultation and dialogue and that will allow for a peaceful solution to be reached among all the parties involved.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I had not intended to speak today in the Chamber, but I wanted to respond to some of the things that we have just heard. I will therefore take this opportunity to thank Staffan de Mistura and his team for all their work, which is not proving as fast or as productive as all of us would like, but I think that we are very grateful to Staffan for all his efforts. I was also interested to hear the Chinese account of the work of their envoy.

We all know what needs to be done. We have had very many discussions in this Chamber and in the Consultations Room about Syria. I think that what we struggle with is how to get it done and how to take the next step, so I hope that when we leave the Chamber and go next door into closed consultations, we can actually have a proper discussion, without polemics, about what it will take to get the constitutional committee up and running; what are the concrete steps that need to be taken and how we as the Council can best facilitate and support that; and what it takes to get Idlib protected. Lots of speakers today have referred to Idlib; I think that we all know its importance, scale and significance. I would urge those Astana progenitors to do what they can to ensure that on the ground, people in Idlib are safe and that we avert a humanitarian catastrophe there. But I would like to have a proper discussion next door about how the Council can actually support that.

I wanted to turn to the issue of the Syrian Government engaging with the United Nations. The Russian representative referred to backsliding from a political settlement and entrenching Syrian unwillingness for a negotiated solution. I think that those two statements are very damning, but they are not damning about us; they are damning about the Syrian regime. We really need all those with influence on Syria, including Russia and Iran, to encourage it to set aside a military strategy as a way to resolve the conflict and to engage with the United Nations across the board, so that we can get back to Geneva and to a political settlement. It is not we in the West who are stopping

that happening. The onus is truly on Syria to follow the will of the Security Council and its resolutions and to allow the United Nations to do its work to help the people of Syria. Those are the main things I wanted to say, but I would like to touch on three more points as well, if I may.

We support what the Special Envoy said about bringing women in, which I think is long overdue, and he can count on the United Kingdom's full support for that. I would also like to refer to Iran and the strikes on Israel from Syrian territory, on which we are in full agreement with the United States representative's comments and have been very vocal about in public. I also want to comment on the Russian representative's remarks about the air strikes. I will not rehearse why France, the United States and the United Kingdom took the action we did, except to say that we did it to avert a humanitarian catastrophe, and in doing so we helped to protect civilians on the ground, deterred and degraded Syria's ability to use chemical weapons and thereby upheld the global prohibition on weapons of mass destruction.

While I think those things remain very important, they should not be used by anyone on the Council as a reason to let the Syrian Government off the hook where engaging with the United Nations on the political process is concerned. The political process has been essential since 2012, when the Geneva talks were started. It has been increasingly essential since then, and it continues to be essential now. I therefore hope that when we go next door we can have a very detailed discussion about how we as the Council can get back to the spirit of Sweden and actually help Staffan de Mistura and his team do something concrete to achieve that, and have no more mud-slinging.

The President: In accordance with rule 37 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to participate in this meeting.

I now give the floor to the representative of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): To begin with, the delegations of the United States and the United Kingdom have tried to promote false claims justifying their aggression against sovereign States, particularly my country, Syria, with the aim of concealing their direct involvement in terrorism and their part in the responsibility for the bloodshed in Syria. I would like to say to them that the testimony, as cited in the media, of the thousands of Syrians who have escaped the blockades of armed terrorist groups in eastern Ghouta, has proved that those countries have been involved in making those citizens suffer through their support of those terrorist groups. Through their positions, their malicious acts and their illegal occupation of various areas of Syria, they have shown that, contrary to their claims, they cannot let go of their history of greed, occupation and imperialism. When speaking in the Council, they claim falsely that they are trying to find a political solution to the situation in Syria, but let me point out, briefly, that we have been able to defeat their agenda in Aleppo and eastern Ghouta, and we will be able to ensure that they cannot win in any part of my country.

For the past seven years, since the beginning of the terrorist war in Syria, the United States, Britain and France have been working relentlessly to support and help conduct that war. They have also used the United Nations as a political tool to put pressure on the Syrian Government to implement their hegemonic agenda, interfere in our internal affairs and destabilize my country. They have not used the United Nations to fight terrorism and its sponsors or to help Syria overcome the suffering inflicted on it by armed terrorist groups, which should have been the goal.

The Special Envoy devoted part of his statement to discussing the humanitarian situation. In that regard, I want to reiterate that the Syrian Government gives priority to providing every kind of humanitarian assistance to all Syrians in need, wherever they are in Syria. That is our duty, and we are doing our duty. The legal and constitutional obligations established under international decisions and Security Council resolutions on combating terrorism obliged my Government to undertake military operations in eastern Ghouta in order to rescue civilians from the armed terrorist groups holding them hostage and using them for years as human shields. In that regard, I want to state that contrary to some false narratives, the successful military operations conducted by the Syrian Arab Army and its allies against the armed terrorist groups controlling a number of areas that the United Nations has classified as besieged or hard to reach — along with the settlement and reconciliation agreements — have all mitigated civilians' suffering, reduced the numbers of those areas and facilitated humanitarian access to them, including eastern Ghouta.

We deplore the fact that the United States speaks of its eagerness to reach a political agreement while it has been committing acts of aggression against my country based on lies, simply because it is working to give support to the armed groups because they have suffered losses in eastern Ghouta. It was the United States that supported Israel's aggression on 9 May when Israel was unable to protect its own proxy terrorist groups and implement its conspiracy against my country's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Israel has continued its dangerous acts of aggression, which would not have been possible without the continuing unstinting support of the United States Government, because it enjoys impunity as a result of the support it has from the United States in the Security Council, enabling Israel to continue its terrorist acts threatening international peace and security in the region and the world. The Syrian Arab Republic reaffirms that through its military and armed forces it is able and ready to fend off all acts of aggression against its sovereignty and independence. However, we want to reiterate that any attempts to support this failing terrorism will not work. Such flagrant violations will not present obstacles to us in combating terrorism throughout Syrian territory.

Yesterday we concluded round nine of the Astana process, and we are pleased with the results. We thank the delegations of Russia, Iran and the host country, Kazakhstan, for making the Astana process a success with regard to combating terrorism. The outcome document of the meeting stresses the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic against any external entities that attempt to violate them.

In cooperation with our friends and allies, the Syrian army has succeeded in liberating eastern Ghouta and the southern area of Damascus, making the capital and its surrounding areas safe. With the cooperation of our friends and brothers, we have also expelled the terrorists from the northern area of Homs and the southern area of Hama. Today we reaffirm that we will continue to fight terrorism and to work to liberate each and every part of our territory from terrorism and from countries that seek to undermine our sovereignty.

In conclusion, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic will spare no effort to support all genuine efforts to arrive at a political solution whereby Syrians, and only Syrians, will decide their future and make choices aimed at safeguarding Syria's sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity.

The President: The representative of the United Kingdom has asked for the floor to make a further statement.

Ms. Pierce (United Kingdom): I just wanted to comment on the Syrian representative's last statement, in which he said that the Syrian Arab Republic will spare no effort to arrive at a political solution. That is obviously a welcome statement. I would like to ask him if he could tell the Council, or is willing to say today, that Syria will put the same amount of effort into engaging with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria and with the Council in order to take concrete steps to get the Geneva process to work and to get a constitutional committee off the ground. If Syria were able to make that commitment today in the Chamber, I believe that would unlock a lot of things for the Council.

The President: The representative of the Syrian Arab Republic has asked for the floor to make a further statement. I now give him the floor.

Mr. Mounzer (Syrian Arab Republic) (*spoke in Arabic*): We have said time and again that we are working with the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria. A delegation from the Syrian Arab Republic is working directly with him. We are eager, as we have said repeatedly, to find a peaceful, Syrian-led solution to the Syrian crisis.

The President: There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

The meeting rose at 11.25 a.m.